

ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਕੀ ਫਤਹ ॥

GURU NANAK AND HIS MISSION

BY
TEJA SINGH, M.A.



1959

Published by:—

SHIROMANI GURDWARA P. COMMITTEE,
AMRITSAR.

12 N.P.

GURU NANAK AND HIS MISSION

I

GURU NANAK

Guru Nanak's sympathetic way of dealing with the existing religions of the world is often misinterpreted by those superficial observers of Sikhism who see in our great Guru nothing more than a reformer, who carried a message of peace for everybody, and who found here nothing to quarrel with. His largeness of view, in holding all men equal before God, is brought forward to witness that he recognised no defects in the prevailing systems of belief. The popular opinion about him is that he was a great *Faqir*, like so many others, who from time to time have been appearing in India to enrich its sacred literature and re-awaken for a time the love of God in the minds of its people. Even the best lovers of Sikhism, like Mr. Macauliffe, have not been able to improve upon this limited view. Nay, even some of the most enlightened Sikhs of to-day give us no better idea of Guru Nanak's religion. The impression left upon the mind of the reader is simply this : that Guru Nanak, whom we profess to be the greatest teacher of the world, was not better than a common latitudinarian philosopher with no fixed principles, who

identifies his doctrines at once with those accepted by the Hindus and Mohammedans, and is made to acknowledge the presence of a regular civil service of God and is made to commit himself to all the ancient vagaries about Heaven and Hell. So that to most people Guru Nanak's task appears to be that of a free lance between contending parties. It is said that if his own work was constructive in any way it was only on the social side—It was only corruptions in society that he attacked, not the doctrines on which that social system was based.

Yet if he had nothing constructive, his powers, let them have been as transcendent as they would, must have passed away unproductive and blighted, as has happened in so many cases, as Swami Ram Tirath, Tolstoy etc. If he had brought with him no new truth, no new support for the tottering humanity, we, his followers, would have lived our little day among the ignoble sects of an effete civilization and would have passed off and been heard of no more. If, then, Sikhism has made a mark among the religions of the world and if it is destined to hold its ground loftily in future, it must have had, in spite of what it appears now, a substantial originality given to it by its founder.

Guru Nanak, upon his advent, found Hinduism a seething mass of moral putrefaction. He detected among its elements a certain superstition, which

would make out an end of everything which was first intended as a means. He saw living spirit dried up into formulae, and formulae whether of mechanical worship, or meritorious readings, or contracts of reward and punishment, were ever so contrived as to escape making any demands upon the conscience. He struck at the root of this superstition by demanding truth in faith and spirit in worship. He cleared away everything that encumbered the relation between God and man. He recognized no incarnation, no direct revelation, no human intercession on behalf of man in the court of heaven. He preached Purity, Justice, Goodness. He held out no promises in this world except those of suffering, as his successors and followers were to suffer, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for His sake. He held out no promises even in the next world, of the "Houris of the retiring glances," or the "Kama Dhenu," or the "Kalpa tree," but the meeting of the Loved One Himself. It was to be with God—to lose one's self in Him. The ideal of life, the measure of salvation, he taught, is not happiness or peace of mind. To serve God and be able to love Him is in itself better than happiness, though it be with wounded feet, and bleeding brows, and hearts laden with sorrow.

There were many other ways in which he brought true knowledge to bear^{*} upon the problem of life. He separated pedantic Philosophy from Religion, and

declared it to be a mere gymnastics of the mind. Religion was thus to be less a matter of intellect than of spirit. The practice of Yoga may do very well for emptying the mind of desires, but it gives only a negative result. Man remains removed from the love of God as much in this stupid nothingness as when he is troubled by various desires. Therefore he substituted music, the singing of God's praises, for the Yoga as means of linking the soul of Man with God.

There is another lesson in positive virtue which is a great improvement upon the rules of conduct. There are always two sorts of duties, what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. The world had very early recognized the latter, and many very beautiful sets of commandments like the Jewish decalogue have come down to us. But, by concentrating all their attention on one side of the matter, the people had contrived to forget that any other side existed at all. Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not lie, thou shalt not do this or that——this was all that was understood by the word Dharma or Duty. This emphasis on the negative side of virtue led to the adoption in the east of asceticism as the highest ideal of life, which ultimately meant the negation of all manly duty. In the west the old code of morals had been much improved upon by Christ, who declared that it was our duty to love our neighbour as ourselves. But what are we to do for our neighbour beside abstaining from doing him injury? It is too general, and

therefore, though in itself a very high teaching, has benefitted the western world very little. Duty, with the westerner, means no more the service of humanity, but an enlightened prudence. This comes of not understanding the teaching of Christ. Guru Nanak preached a higher truth. To him love was active *service*, and his followers soon profited by this teaching. One can see no higher record of service in the annals of nations than that shown by the Sikhs, who were taught to annihilate the thought of self and utilise all their energies in the service of God and humanity.

Closely allied with the idea of service was his Vedantism. Curiously enough Guru Nanak differs from the Hindu Philosophers most where he seems perfectly to agree with them. So his Vedantism differs from the Hindu Vedantism as white differs from black. To a Hindu Vedantist there is nothing absolutely existing except God and that God is the Vedantist himself. To Guru Nanak, on the other hand, himself is nothing, God is everything. He reduces the thought of self to nothing before the infinity of God. Humility could go no further.

Now take the relation of man with God, as preached by Guru Nanak. Man and woman are equal before one another and before God—a truth higher than ever preached before in India—nay, even in the whole world except in Arabia. Woman becomes more

sacred, her dignity even higher than man's, so much so that our Guru could not adore God but in her disguise. Christ could not think of a better relation between God and man than that of a father and son. With Guru Nanak, however, a wife's constancy to her husband represented more befittingly the relation between a faithful man and God. A son may not be the constant companion of his father after his marriage ; but the wife is always wife, always constant, always seeking support of her Lord and Love. During the foreign tyranny the effect of oppression was greatest on the Indian females. What was sadder still, they had lost respect even in the eyes of their own kinsmen. But, with the advent of Sikhism, where man became more precious in the sight of man, woman too gained a dignity and respect, which though not amounting to that exaggerated worship so conspicuous in the west, was yet an unprecedented improvement on the relation existing between the sexes in India. The result was a kind of chivalry unlike anything that had appeared in Europe or in Rajasthan. The Sikh became a knight who had no personal motive, no passion of worldly love to inspire him in the performance of his duty. The sight of wronged innocence or oppressed weakness was sufficient to move him to action. The Arthurian legends may be likened to king Rama's adventures, the Carolingian romances to Raja Rasalu's and the Armadis romances to the tales of Rajasthan. But

for Sikh chivalry we can find no parallel. The knights of all other chivalries belong to the court of gallant Indra, but the Sikh knights belong to the court of—whom else but Guru Nanak.

Woman also gained the religious rights. Hinduism, like Judaism, had denied her practically all share in immortality. She had no personal religion, no spiritual responsibility, no claim, no part in the law of God. She was denied all access to holy scriptures. She was to remain content with the mere performance of domestic, social, and individual duties, never to vivify or heighten them by the rays of God's eternal love. Poor Indian woman! Even in her happiest lot there is always left a void in her heart, which ever-acting piety alone can fill; and she whose portion is to suffer, whose lot is lonely, O! what misery must be hers, unless she can lean upon her God, and draw from His word the blessed conviction that she is not forgotten, that His love, His tenderness, are hers, far beyond the feeble conceptions of the earth. Guru Nanak felt for the suffering womankind and gave them their full share in the goodness of God. She was declared (see Var Asa, XIX) to be directly responsible for her morals to God. Religious congregations were thrown open to them. They were to partake freely in the religious and secular observances, and no social custom was to hinder them in doing so. Sikh women are to this day seen attending all occasions of public worship,

all conferences, along with the members of the other sex, and their conjoint as well as alternate singing, in which they often lead the chorus, must move the heart of every man who wants to see what Guru Nanak did for womankind.

Man who was told before that the body, being the source of sin, was to be condemned, that his continuing to live in the world was a crime, now was taught by Guru Nanak to believe that his body was the temple of the Supreme Being, and that, as such, instead of being mortified, it deserved to be cherished as a precious gift of God.

Guru Nanak's conception of God was also higher than the world had known it before. The God of the Mohammedans had too much of the fire of Hell and the chains and the rod of his wrath about Him. The Hindus never had one God, or if they knew one, it was only at the head of a legion of godlings, a little God—

In his floating rest and snaky shade,
Who slumbers on beside the nectar urn.

With them their impersonal (*Nirgun*) God was too far above the world or indistinguishable from His own creation. As a (*Sargun*) Personal God. He came in contact with them only in a supernatural way or through Avataras which gave occasion to the rankest superstition. In Hinduism man does not walk with God as in Sikhism. Therefore we do

not find prayer much used in Hinduism. Guru Nanak, on the other hand, lived in God as a fish in the water, and with God like a wife with her husband. He is in constant communion with Him through prayer.

Guru Nanak's moral laws are written on the tablets of eternity. They are not made up to human ideas and notions about things, which the mere increase of knowledge makes incredible. They are not mixed up with absurd miracles, revelations and miscalculations about the creation of the world. The world may change its theories of life; it may overhaul the whole relations of science, history and what is received as religion, but Sikhism will not have to undergo any the least change in its creed. Sikhs can only change by going out of Sikhism.

With all this we yet feel there is something wrong with us who profess to believe in Sikhism. How those high feelings ebbed away and Sikhs became what we know them, we are partially beginning to see. It seems we have been for the last century retreating back into the Hindu ranks, and have been slowly accommodating the spiritual truth contained in Sikhism with the same effete system of belief, from which our Gurus had so bravely endeavoured to rescue us. Let us see how, as soon as we were allowed to escape from the city of Destruction, we fell into the Slough of Despondence.

It seems, then, from our experience that there

is no doctrine in itself so pure, but that the meaner nature which is in us can disarm and distort it, and we can adapt it to our own littleness. Our minds take shape from our hearts, and the facts of moral experience do not teach their own meaning but submit to many readings according to the power of understanding which we bring with us. The want of a clear perception of Sikhism has involved many of its followers in strange anomalies in the past and still we have not done with them. These anomalies could be easily resolved if they had been referred constantly to the word of God handed down to us by Guru Nanak. But this the Sikhs were not allowed to do by circumstances. Sikhism never had a chance of its life. The chosen few, whose presence could keep awake the spirit of truth among the masses, soon after the death of the last Guru, were called upon to fight for their lives or defend the weak from the oppressors. They were removed from amidst the common people, who were left to their own resources or had to depend upon the old professional teachers, who now got the chance of renewing their hereditary vocation of mercenary teaching. The Sikh temples fell into the hands of the monastic orders, or other Non-Sikh element that is ever ready to grasp at a duty that pays. These temples, originally intended by our Gurus to disseminate true faith and knowledge among the believers, became—and through our negligence or helplessness are still—the great—

source of corrupt knowledge and immorality. The converts who came almost exclusively from among the Hindus, brought to the contemplation of new moral forces revealed by Sikhism an imagination saturated with the spiritual convictions of the old era, which were not lost upon them, but were infinitely expanded to engulf Sikhism too. They could not leap from their shadow. A Hindu, it is said, would eat religiously, drink religiously and sleep religiously; but it is equally true that he would sin religiously. Therefore a man of such a training, when brought in contact with a new Sikh would spread over him a fascination which it would not be very easy to fling off. There being no separate social organization for the Sikhs, except what was in the Books; there being no religious hindrance to intermarriages with the uninitiated, it was very easy for the Sikhs to drift back towards the Hindus, their antecedents. Worst of all, there was no missionary movement among the Sikhs, except local conversions through the personal contact of the Sikhs with the Hindus. There was no organised effort made to spread the truth of Sikhism abroad. It is only missionary work that can keep up the spirit of truth among the followers of a religion. When this is absent, there can be no idea of progress. There may be faith, superstition and all, but there will be no sense of truth, no advance in thought.

These have been the causes of our degeneration in the past. From a few years Sikhism is again striving to return to its original level; but the circumstances have so changed and the progress of Sikhism has been neglected so long, that to a great extent we have to fight the battle over again. The first and most urgent need is that we should reclaim our Gurdwaras (temples) from the hands of corrupt men, and freeing them from the immoral influences we have to make them the real sources of true knowledge. Then we have to spread correct knowledge about Sikhism and its history. The more exact habit of thought engendered by Science has notoriously made it necessary that grounds should be reconsidered on which we are to believe and show that India was governed for centuries on principles quite different from those of Sikhism. The haphazard attempts to explain Sikhism by identifying it with the old system of thought, which it was its special function to replace, will always end in failure. They would do more harm to the progress of Sikhism than if there were nothing more to comment upon our Faith than our Holy Book. Bad pleading in a good cause is the surest way to bring discredit upon it.

Instead of indulging in mere sentiment we should try to form a clear conception of Sikhism and create a homogeneity in the doctrines of our Faith. We should be clearly convinced of the greatness of the mission of our Gurus. At present we seem to be

contented with the narrow sphere in which the truths of Sikhism are allowed to work. If we had known their greatness we would not have confined them to ourselves. Missionary enterprise in a nation is the measure of its faith. One thing we require nowadays is enthusiasm, burning enthusiasm to feel the spirit of Guru Nanak in our midst and convince others of its presence among us.

II

SIKH MISSION WORK.

Guru Nanak was a missionary in the truest sense of the word. His whole life was a life of message. He travelled over a greater part of land than any prophet has ever done in the world. And when we consider the difficulties of moving about, the hardness of times, and the diversity of political, social and religious regions, through which he had to pass during his travels, we cannot but marvel at the energy and patience with which he adapted himself to the everchanging forces of his time.

He travelled over nearly the whole of Southern Asia; and wherever he went he left men behind to carry on his work and deliver his message of salvation even to those who had not personally heard him. In the Panjab several converts took up his Mission. Bhai Lallo was preaching in the North; Sajjan in the South-West. In Benares Gopal Das; in Bushair Jhanda Badi; in Kiratpur Budhan Shah; in Mahisar Mahi; in Jagannath Kalyug the priest's son; in Lushai (Tibet) Devlut; in Behar and Patna Salis Rai; in Ceylon Raja Shiv Nabh, and a host of other workers were scattered over the whole area traversed by Guru Nanak. There were centres of his mission in Junagadh, Cuttock, Bedar, Johar (Sbathu), Nanak Mata (Kamaon Hills), Khatmandoo, Persian Gulf,

Kabul, Jalalabad, and other places.

After Guru Nanak the number of the converts went on increasing, until by the time of the Fifth Guru the Sikhs became a power to be counted with even in politics. The mission work became regular, but its scope became narrow, as the forces it had created in the Panjab required the constant presence of the Guru there. The *Masand* system did not work long. Being localised the Masands forgot to realize the greatness of the mission entrusted to them, and became lazy and corrupt. They were put an end to by the great corrector of evils, Guru Gobind Singh. Then the *Granthi* or the *Mahant* system began. But it always remained in a neglected state. The persecution of the Sikhs called forth all hands to the defence of the Khalsa, and no energy could be spared for any other line of work. The Sikh temples fell into the hands of the Non-Sikh element, which lay like an incubus on the much-afflicted Sikhism. After the Gurus no serious attempt has been made to spread Sikhism beyond the Province of its birth. Our attention has always been rivetted on something else, and we have not yet realised the great possibilities of our Faith. In the days of our rule, when there were great opportunities, much was done in the interest of the Khalsa, but mainly on the decorative side of our religion.

With the advent of the new age, Sikhism seems

to have gained something from the West, which is in a way an ally of Sikhism in its broader outlook and freer intelligence. The new age, with its universal relations and universal ideas, subjects every religious belief that it meets to a terrific strain and test. Customs and laws which for centuries have satisfied the people's minds are now creaking, crashing, and falling to pieces like the spars of an old ship caught in a cyclone. Sikhism alone seems to have weathered the storm.

But the calmness of thought being not yet restored, there is for the moment a wave of scepticism passing over the minds of the educated people. They do not have any special regard for their religion and like to pass their days in a kindly indifference. It inspires them with no enthusiasm. It furnishes them with no motive for action. They do not know that this latitudinarianism loosens even the elementary principles of theology. It destroys the premises on which a religious system rests. It can talk much in its defence, but the practical effect of it, as the world now stands, is only to make the educated into sceptics or infidels and to leave the multitude to a comfortable but demoralising superstition. Mere negation, which they call liberalism, is a good corrective in the beginning, but it is not useful as a permanent measure. It has to assume an organised form and settle in a house of itself.

From this habit of mind come impatience with the forms and ritual of our religion. They want to live on pure philosophy. They must bear in mind that an Ideal, however philosophical, can be made workable only by subjecting it to the Real. It has always to grow in the Real, as Carlyle puts it, and has to seek out its bed and board there.

Even among the educated there is a small class of men, whose hearts burn for the advancement of Sikhism, but being hard-worked in other professions and snatching with difficulty sufficient leisure to learn how complicated is the problem, they can but turn to those for assistance who are set apart and maintained as their theological trustees, the Granthis and preachers. In the general scramble for the Government Service it goes hard with them to think of self-sacrifice and to make a bold jump for the Guru themselves.

Now it is clear that the chief work of mission lies with the Granthis and preachers, and for years to come it will have to be done through them alone, until the educated people also realise that their indifference is fatal to the real progress of Sikhism and that the later they come into the field the harder the task will be against the contending forces of other religions.

We have yet to create our missionary agency for beyond the Panjab. Our preachers and musicians,

the existing spiritual forces of Sikhism, are a mere local Militia, which may be useful in the case of an attack from outside, but cannot be sent abroad on a religious campaign. To tell the truth, for the purposes of religious propaganda where exists on organization among the Sikhs at all. Hinduism may not need organization. It flourishes best when there is no organization. Like good poetry it suffers when there is definiteness and completeness in it, and the modern attempts at some form of organization may be said to have worked evil. Sublime anarchy! Sikhism, however, can work only when different individualities are gathered up into one. Even our prayer is not individual. It is from all and for all. There is no word for which the Hindus or the Mohammedans can gather themselves together as a whole. Catholics have the word "Church," but they cannot include all the functions of a nation, its history, its military, worldly, and religious units into one. But the word "Khalsa" includes all the institutions and activities into one whole. There must be a confederacy or a centralised organization among the Sikhs, which should send forth religious preachers to all parts of the country. Much of money and energy is being spent in different localities in vain. Day after day, month after month, preachers go to the same cities where their lectures are not so much needed as in other places. If there were one central body for this work, it

would first hold a missionary survey of the province and then allot the work of different districts to different local bodies, who would have to be responsible for its share in the expenses by local contributions year after year. These local men would meet together to represent their work according to the means and scope for it. As regards money people would give as much as they can, if they know what they are about and what is at stake. They are given for education as eagerly as any other nation in India, because here they realise what it is they give for.

Whoever holds his religion with conviction and intelligence necessarily looks forward to its becoming the cherished possession of every human being. Missionary movement is the most vital activity of a faith. The church must expand or perish of unbelief. You may say we have to convert the Panjab first ; but it is an unreasonable and unjust attitude towards Sikhism. Guru Nanak did not do so. No prophet was ever able to convert his own country as a whole. We are fortunate enough to have scored at least something. We should carry the message of Guru Nanak first to those parts of our Province which have for so long remained without it. But we should not uselessly fritter away our strength in the plains of the Panjab, when the message would be more welcome to those other parts of the country, which have been deprived of Guru's word for too long. We shall have also to consider the question of different languages in

which it is to be handed down to the different sections of humanity.

The world is moving a little faster than we imagine. The evolution of our human life has entered upon a new stage, when it will be hard for those who want to pace it according to their sweet pleasure. The slow communities are jousled out of the common run if they cannot keep pace with others. The ideal before us all is not the Province-ideal, not the country-ideal but the world-ideal. A religion has no right to exist if it does not show any progress along the lines set down by its founder. Sikhism started with the higher ideals of Love, Service, and Knowledge than any religion of that day. Love of God and humanity was the greatest truth preached to us. It was not a mere sentiment or affection but a rule of conduct. But our *service* of drawing water and pulling *Punkha* has been confined to the temple—a mere parody of the great Teaching. We have not learnt to experiment service beyond the laboratory. We have not recognised that the humblest human being is the child of our Great Father and therefore no service that any man can do to him can be too great. What can be the limit of the honour, the kindness done to my own brother, when we are both children of the Lord of all things. How do we feel when we remember Guru Nanak spending his night with a leper ! Guru Arjun in Tarn Taran ! But it is the Christian who comes to build an asylum for lepers in the city

of the Fifth Guru.

No less significant were bold acts of public service by which Guru Nanak protested in the most effective way possible against the great moral and religious abuses which marked the orthodox Hindu and Muslim life in his day and thereby became the pioneer and the example of moral and religious reform to the nations. But how many Sikhs now take part in the all-India movements of social reform? How many of us have effaced the distinction between the Hindu and the Muslim? How many of us have banished the *chauka* system from our homes? It is idle to cry against a system, when we take it as the height of virtue to observe superstitious rules of sanctity about our food. The Guru used to ask Mohammedans to dinner along with the Hindus. Do we do that in our homes? Do we do it at least on Gurburb days, when we make show of opening Guru's kitchen, which should be free to all the rich and poor alike! No, we dare not! Is there any missionary movement possible with us as long as we hold fast to such absurd distinctions?

Even Hinduism remains untouched. Hinduism is where our Gurus left it. It remains, in spite of Sikhism, an unreformed religion. There it lies, a boulder left in our fertile valley by a moving glacier which has long ago spent itself. Our want of duty led the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj to be established. And now the problem has become more

complex. Hinduism still stands there dying in thousands for eclipses and Amavises, still mumbling mantras as old as humanity itself—still unconquered. For our part we have been accomodating Sikhism to Hinduism. Our Granthis and Preachers have been ever ready to turn to the prevailing beliefs of India. The inner truth of the Guru's word is seldom touched. We glide over the *bani* instead of reading it with intelligence as a message from God, and hence it is that in spite of our reciting *Asa de Var* every day before the congregations, people have rarely learnt what corruptions are attacked there.

To tell the truth, Sikhs, in order to justify their faith, must live better, know better, and die better than those whom they want to convert, otherwise there is no place for them in the world of religions.

Our preachers, for want of any deep feeling for the suffering humanity, often confirm people in their absurd ways of thinking and acting. This debating system must be discontinued. To attack other men's gods and prove them to be filth-eaters only estranges their sympathies and creates prejudice against our mission. It does not subjugate the will. It only suffices to irritate but cannot convince. Calm and sober-minded men always shrink away from such preachers. In a speech the whole religion should not be addressed ; because the listner assumes the attitude of the champion of his religion, and with this submergence of individuality the strength

of the whole religion gathers in him, with the sense of honour and self-respect which hardens him against any personal appeal. Sajjan, the *thug*, was addressed alone, when his only companions were the evils of his soul. The Guru begins with the similies, "Bronze is bright and shining..." half to himself, and, Sajjan is at once alarmed about the perilous state of his soul. Do not oppose Sikhism to Hinduism or any other religion, but oppose the offended Maker to the sinning soul of man. And then, you see, the Guru spoke to Sajjan in music accompanied by Mardana's rebeck. The music works its influence with the nature of man before he is aware who is speaking to him. The change takes place within and the man is reconciled to his Father.

The man who takes upon himself the task of preaching has first to give up his whole self to Guru Nanak. This complete self-surrender to the Guru does not leave any scope for rough behaviour towards fellow-men. When a man gives up his entire nature to the Guru, the Guru himself enters into his nature.

Who knows but the world has yet to know the greatness of Guru Nanak and his mission.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

1. Japji, rendered into English.
2. Asa-di-Var, rendered into English.
3. Psalm of Peace (or Sukhmani).
4. A Short History of the Sikhs.
5. Highroads of Sikh History, Bks.
6. Sikhism : Its Ideals & Institutions.
7. Essays in Sikhism.
8. Growth of Responsibility in Sikhism.
9. Gurdwara Reform Movement.



Printed by S. Ravel Singh Secy., S. G. P. C.
at
The Gurdwara Printing Press, Ramsar Road, Amritsar.

